

Affirmative action in Higher Education in Brazil: São Paulo's turn

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In August 2012 the Brazilian President, Dilma Rousseff, signed a bill making it mandatory for all federal universities in Brazil to reserve 50% of the places in each degree program for students coming from public schools according to their family incomes and their ethnic profile (self-declared descendants of blacks and Brazilian natives), and giving them four years to implement the programs. Not to be undone, in December of 2012 the governor of the State of São Paulo, Geraldo Alkmin, announced his own affirmative action project for the state universities, calling it a program of “social inclusion with merit”.

Differently from the federal government that enacted the legislation without any consideration for how to address the low educational qualifications of most students coming from public schools, the São Paulo project introduced two innovations: first, students entering through the quota system would have to attend two years of a preparatory college, after which they would have access to university degree programs according to their achievements. Second, those students would also get a stipend of half the Brazilian minimum wage, about 140 US dollars a month.

Some figures are needed to place policies in perspective. According to the most recent data, there were 6.7 million higher education students in Brazil, of which one million were enrolled in federal institutions, 620 thousand in state institutions (of which 163 thousand in the state universities of São Paulo). Most of the students, about 5 million or 73%, are enrolled in private institutions, most

¹ <http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/world-view/affirmative-action-higher-education-brazil-são-paulo's-turn>

of them for-profit. Access to public institutions is through competitive exams that usually favor students coming from private schools, generally of better quality and financially inaccessible to students from poor families. 87% of the students in secondary education are in public schools, their family income is a third of those in private schools, and the quality of the public schools are significantly lower than secondary schools in the private sector.

It makes sense, therefore, to look for ways to give more opportunities in higher education to students coming from public schools and poor backgrounds, even while the poor quality of the public secondary schools persists (The “race” criteria, strongly correlated with income, is another matter, not discussed here). Since these students tend to be less qualified, however, it is far from clear that they will be able to reach the levels of their peers easily and there is a strong chance that the public universities will have to lower their standards to respond to this new clientele.

The inequity in São Paulo, Brazil’s richest state, is still higher, with only 10% of their students attending the state-funded universities – Universidade de São Paulo, Universidade de Campinas and the State University of São Paulo, UNESP – which are among the best and better endowed in the country. The solution proposed by the state, in negotiation with the university authorities, assumes that the two year preparatory college would be enough to prepare the students to be successful in university programs and, if not, they can still enter the vocational schools that exist to some extent in São Paulo, but are mostly absent in other regions.

The challenge is that, except for a pilot experiment at the University of Campinas, Brazilian higher education is based on the traditional European arrangement in which the students go directly from secondary school to professional careers, and in the past all attempts to create two-year, general, pre-university programs have failed. The São Paulo government announced that this preparatory college will rely heavily on ITC and distance education to grow rapidly, since the expectation is that, in five years, half of the students in public universities will be coming from public secondary schools. At the same time, instead of offering different options for the students, the project seems to assume that everybody

will follow the same liberal-arts curricula, with vocational education reserved for those who fail after the first year. It is not a good recipe for a higher education system that hopes to expand and become more inclusive.